Hon George Foster M.P.
With compliments
B.W.

AN OPEN LETTER

TO

SIR WILFRID LAURIER.

by

Beckles Wilson

AN OPEN LETTER to the Right Hon. Sir WILFRID LAURIER, P.C., G.C.M.G., &c.

SIR,

You may possibly be surprised at my choosing this mode of conveying my sentiments, but I am conscious of having a duty to perform, and in writing this letter I hope to perform it.

It is now eight years since the defeat and disintegration of the Conservative party in Canada. The country wanted new men and new measures. A kind of atrophy had overtaken the body politic, and we were ready to welcome any change which promised greater cohesion, zeal and industry in the conduct of our affairs. At the risk of bombast I may say with truth that Young Canada in 1896, weary of altruism, of hypocrisy, of inertia, was prepared to put country before party. . fact that you, the new Prime Minister of the Crown in Canada, French and not of English extraction, far from causing us misgiving, led rather to augur greater unity amongst us as a people under the crown of Britain. Your personality appealed to our eye, although most of us, even in our exuberance, took the inner character it seemed to denote, upon trust; your oratory, if it was more forced, more florid, than we were accustomed to in the speeches of Sir John Macdonald, Howe, Tupper, and Blake, yet seemed to us very pleasant and highly creditable to your study of debate. With these two assets you took office. Our own chief reliance was upon Hope.

The sage has told us that the secret of happiness in this life is not to expect too much. We did not expect too much. We did not look for in you the masterful temper, the deep sagacity, the luminous humour that distinguished Macdonald. We knew you as a French Canadian of the Papineau school, which the large-hearted Chapleau contemned: men spoke of you as a reactionary Radical; we heard of you as the companion of the fatuous Médéric Lancetot, and the blatant Republican, Eric Dorion. We knew something of you as the editor of *Le Defricheur*. In rallying to your standard in 1896, we forgave and tried to forget much. You had opposed Confederation, you had opposed the Transcontinental Railway. In 1866 you had written: "*We (of the Papineau school) do not care a fig for the English Colonies. When any change whatsoever is proposed in our political or social institutions, we do not look to see whether this change will be of use to the English Colonies or to any other neighbour; we think only of Lower Canada and of the French race. What have we in common with the English Colonies? What interests, what relations bind us to them? Is it a matter of origin, religion, language, national aspirations? No! not at all!*"

These were hard words coming from a descendant of the conquered peasants to whom our countrymen of England had given a Constitution, the use of their language, benevolent dispensations and a toleration which astonished the world. But we, in turn, mindful of the benefits we had received from Britain, could abide the selfishness of your school. Twenty millions sterling has been spent upon us by the taxpayers of the Mother Country: all which this expenditure alone implies had not prevented us speaking our mind, freely upon occasion. It had not precluded frequent expressions of bitterness. We understood, then, your rancour towards ourselves, whom you regarded not as conquerors, but intruders, by virtue of the arms of Britain. The Mexican still exhibits the same sentiments towards the English-speaking race which has ousted him north of the Rio Grande. But how different is the case! We have not displaced a single French Canadian from his home nor curtailed a single one of his liberties.

Again, some of us were not wholly blind when we gave you our suffrages in 1896, to your paradoxical sympathies with the infatuated rebel, Louis Riel. "If," you had proclaimed with that theatrical hyperbole which we so admired, because it is so rare with us ("foreigners" I think you call us), "if I had belonged to the half-breed community on the banks of the Saskatchewan, I would have shouldered my musket in defence of my rights against the government!" We, who know your non-military temperament, can hardly restrain a smile at the extravagance of the allusion.

But let such history pass. I am concerned with your administration. A bad or foolish minister has always the resource of prudent advisers. The Constitution of our country fortunately provides ample safeguards for the abuse of power. Only you were neither bad nor foolish; but amiable and sensible. As a whole, your Cabinet was composed of sensible men—men who, perceiving the temper of the people of Canada and the conditions under which you took office, were agreed upon a policy of moderation as the best means of retaining office. There were one or two exceptions to this rule. In a country like ours, where neither ministers nor legislators give their services without pecuniary reward, and where private affluence is not everywhere common, it is inevitable that a class of professional politicians must arise. It is only fair to say that the voices of these men were generally outweighed in your councils. In the affairs of the Dominion of Canada, the interests of one section were not allowed unduly to obtrude themselves.

I will be brief. Over the issue of the Manitoba Schools question, where a narrow sectarianism and race prejudice threatened to create a painful disturbance and to sow the seeds of future disaffection, every true Canadian, whether Liberal or Conservative, rejoiced. Other acts of your first year of office equally evinced your common-sense and your strict

impartiality. Fortune favoured you. Certain political incidents awoke our people to the consciousness of unity with the British race over seas to a degree unfelt before. Moreover the sentiment became reciprocated with unwonted warmth. Canada was discovered anew: the whole Empire throbbed in unison: and in the midst of the Imperial festivities of 1897 your figure emerged, attractive, enlightened, ever histrionic, as embodying the new spirit of loyalty and racial unity in Canada. At this period I saw much of you. I took pleasure in studying your character, and I perceived that the sensation you had created in Britain was no whit lost upon you. You enjoyed it, you revelled in your wider sphere of lustre. More clearly than ever you perceived your interest to lie in strengthening the community of interest between Britain and the Dominion. You ascertained for yourself that the legends concerning the decadence of Britain were absurd falsehoods. Common observation informed you that you were in the presence of the greatest state, of the greatest people in the world where vast opulence was conjoined to great strength and simplicity of character. You saw daily amongst forty millions of people those two great disiderata—sought in vain by Republics—ORDER and REVERENCE. All of this deeply impressed you and you returned to Canada filled with that exaggerated enthusiasm which is a heritage from your Gallic ancestors. We shall never know—I shall not enquire—how long the fit lasted. For it is an unfortunate trait in your disposition that flood is succeeded by ebb—that the steady and abiding adhesion to a standard of excellence is certain to be interrupted by the sordid and sombre doctrines of Rousseau and Cobbett, Cobden and Papineau. Your admirers may seek for the glow and constancy of Burke in your facile rhetoric, but they will find none in your soul!

You are in the most complete sense of the term, a Reactionary. A hot spell is followed by a cold spell. I would to God I could go further, Sir, and say that therein you stood alone. But there are too many of your unhappy temperament amongst us. Patriotism is made the craze of an hour. The principles which made our forefathers seek a home in the wilderness rather than dwell amidst Democrats and Republicans are forgotten in the pride of shallow and bedizened youth. We forget what we are in the contemplation of the shadow of our arid acres on the map: we forget our helplessness, we lose sight of our duty.

But the harmony of a household—the filial sense of its members—is not to be improved by argument or remonstrance. The sense of Canada's duty permeates, I am glad to say, the body politic in Canada: belief in the brotherhood of our race—gratitude to our British brothers, love of our common flag, loyalty to our common Sovereign is part of our religion. It lay deep in the hearts of the Loyalists: they have transmitted it to us. It is not

a thing to be blasted by a passing neglect: it is not a sentiment to need the constant stimulus of perfervid and meretricious phrases. Like the Thracians after the Jovian tempest.

We do not stare—we need not hearken—
We *feel* and *understand*.

Honestly I may say that, as your quandom friend and partisan, I have breasted all the phases of your shallow and shifty rhetoric for the past five years, and I defy you to point to one speech or utterance wherein you have truly sought to strengthen the British connection or to assimilate British institutions with our own. There is one exception. You have lately taken from us our flag—the Canadian red ensign every Canadian born since 1867 has learned to look upon with affection and reverence, and you have substituted the Union Jack of the British Isles—already a portion of that ensign. For this we withhold our gratitude until we learn what motives dictated the change.

You did all you could to thwart in 1899 our desire to knit firmer the bonds of kinship when the perverse and tyrannical oligarch of the Transvaal invaded the late Queen's dominions. You consented to the dispatch of troops, but only when you saw that that desire could not be thwarted. You had already chosen as the Minister responsible for the Canadian Militia, a man as narrow, as perverted, as re-actionary as yourself: but wholly lacking your manners and suavity. This minister's conduct estranged from us one of the ablest and most single-minded officers who ever undertook to instruct an unmilitary people in the art of war. His every attempt is infuse morale into the militia—to improve the machinery which is capable of putting an army of defence into the field, was persistently obstructed and by whom? by a stubborn country physician, who if he in the days before he found politics more lucrative than medicine, carried his conduct and prejudice into the consulting-room must indeed have ingratiated himself with his patients. The fate of Hutton has now been reserved for Dundonald, his successor, who now, albeit, leaves Canada under an additional debt of gratitude by the straightforward and manly warning he has issued to our people. That such warning should have elicited terms of spleen and malevolence which in other days would have cost your bosom friend, the member for King's County, Nova Scotia, an ounce of lead in his carcase, but which now merely forfeits him the respect of the decent part of the community, is only another recommendation of its truth and value.

We can be sure of nothing amidst the caprices of politics, but if we might dare to prophesy anything, it would be this: that with the departure of this gallant British officer there departs also your good fortune—the genius who has kept you for eight years in power. The Canadian people

dearly love A MAN. They are ready to condone faults if he who commits them has the common attributes of virility. For the chill-blooded Radical —the timid Reactionary—for the politician willing to wound the British connection but yet afraid to strike—we have nothing but contempt. Better the damning avowals of a Tarte—the outspoken disloyalty of a Bourassa—than the lukewarm impartiality, the secret jealousy with which you view our relations with Britain.

And you, YOU ask for more power! You who "cannot understand wars," who regard "the day of militarism" as "past"—are found muttering insolently your regret that your party has not the treaty-making power "which would enable us to dispose of our own affairs." "As long as Canada remains a dependency of the British Crown, the present powers are not sufficient for the maintenance of our rights." Rights! Coming from you the very word should evoke thunders of laughter in Olympus! At all events the mask is laid aside. It is not your fault if the Canadian people cannot see you now divested of the cosmetic pasteboard which screens the features of Médéric Lanctot's weak-kneed colleague; of the disciple of Papineau, the godson of the Quebec traitor, Wolfred Nelson.

Even our insolent Minister of Militia must smile at the notion of his paper army, officered by Grit wire-pullers, marching out to protect Canadian frontiers against Russia, Germany, France, America and all the South-American powers, at the dictation of Wilfrid Laurier, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Admiral of the entire Canadian Fleet, Commander-in-chief of the Canadian Army, and—in his own mind's eye—another National Regenerator —"a second Lincoln,"* President of the Canadian Republic!

I am, Sir,

regretting the necessity which has caused me to speak thus plainly, and in the devout hope that you may shortly, by retiring into a h[illegible] private life, cease to exert a malign influence on the destinies of my coun[illegible],

Your very humble,

Most obedient servant,

BECKLES WILLSON.

* This is the high dignity bestowed upon the Premier by his panegyrist, Mr. Willson. This gentleman I take to be a descendant of the worthy Scotch divine, his namesake, who wrote in 1766 with prescience for his posterity: "Shall I wander here in a hungry desert when they are triumphing above and dividing the spoil?"

July 9th, 1904.